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ABSTRACT

The question "What is the role for research in library and information science?" lies at the heart of an ongoing project sponsored by the Office of Library Programs in the U.S. Department of Education. The project, which was begun in 1986-87, is designed to identify researchable issues that could help libraries attain or maintain a leadership position in the information society. This brief report summarizes the conclusions of a 2-day conference/workshop where reports covering the following topics were reviewed and discussed: (1) creating a model for research in library/information science research using the long-standing research university model as a prototype; (2) creating a think tank to act as an independent applied research organization (e.g., a library/information science Brookings Institute); (3) creating research-library-based infrastructures (e.g., research institutes and programs for visiting scholars, cooperative research grants, and research training); and (4) creating better mechanisms within professional associations to encourage and promote research. The conference was led by Robert M. Hayes, Dean of the UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) Graduate School of Library and Information Science, and the 29 participants included young researchers and practitioners, supportive federal officials, and contributors to both the professional and research literature of library/information science. (SD)

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RETHINKING THE LIBRARY IN THE INFORMATION AGE: WHAT ROLE FOR RESEARCH?

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"What is the role for research in library and information science?" This question lies at the heart of an ongoing project sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Library Programs. The project, begun in 1986-87, was designed to identify researchable issues which could help libraries attain -- or maintain -- a position of leadership in an information society.

The most recent event the project was a conference/workshop on "Building a Library Research Infrastructure." The two-day meeting October 31-November 1, 1988, discussed four papers produced by committees and distributed in advance. The papers were thoughtfully prepared, well written, and bore little resemblance to the typical association committee report.

The invitees were a mixture of articulate young researchers and practitioners, supportive federal officials, and productive contributors both to the professional and research literature in library/information science.

They had been carefully selected from recommendations made to Anne J. Mathews, Director of the Office of Library Programs, U.S. Department of Education. (1)

The meeting was chaired by a well known, well respected

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professional, Robert M. Hayes, Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, UCLA.

The participants had read the papers, thought about the problems, and came prepared for vigorous discussion of how the library/information science world could strengthen and improve its research capability.

Could this group come up with creative ideas about forming a research infrastructure which would take advantage of the just published research agenda laid out by other USDE advisory groups in the last two years? (2)

They could -- and they did.

The four papers examined several different options for encouraging research:

(1) The creation of centers of excellence for research in library and information science based on long-standing university models and located at research universities.

(2) The creation of a think tank to act as an independent applied research organization, e.g. a library and information science Brookings Institution.

(3) The creation of consortia or research library based infrastructures, including research institutes, visiting scholars programs, cooperative research grant programs, and research training programs.

(4) The creation of better mechanisms in professional associations to encourage and promote research through coordination, interaction among subunits, and dissemination.

What observations can one make about the major conclusions of the conferees and their discussion of those papers?

The Need for Multidisciplinary Research at a Significantly Higher Level

This type of research can be done through a variety of structures, but institutes, think tanks, and university centers are the most promising. However, to accomplish such research, three elements are necessary:

Support for released time of part-time personnel and adequate support for full-time research faculty.

Support for doctoral and post-doctoral students.

The ability to attract additional research grants from many different sources.

The Need for Dissemination of Research Results

In major research journals.

In synopses or abstracts for quick assimilation by the field.

By better current awareness services.

By general articles which discuss the implications of

research findings in professional journals.

Need for Research Skills and Better Education of Potential Library/Information Science Professionals

There are too few persons with the sophisticated research skills and advanced training to address even some of the needs formulated by the research agenda task forces.

Need for Leadership

Whatever the mechanism, creation or expansion of current research structures will demand entrepreneurial directors with an understanding of research, the ability to articulate resesarch needs, political skills, and a demonstrated record as grant getters.

THE RESULTS

The 29 participants recognized that the options are many and no one option is likely to meet all needs identified by this workshop and earlier USDE task forces for "Rethinking the Library in the Information Age."

In the absence of a strong leadership thrust from the professional associations and librarians/information specialists themselves, how can any of these recommendations be accomplished?

After vigorous discussion of the papers, an analysis of current research, and the need for a major new thrust and funds to support that thrust, the workshop participants agreed that the larger world of library and information science should be mobilized to

support new intiatives in library/information science research. The audience to be addressed by this new infrastructure should include not only the U.S. Department of Education (which should have a major coordinating role), but also professional associations, library/information science schools, major governmental/foundation/private industry funding sources, and individual researchers themselves. The model for this new coordinating body would be a separate council comparable to the National Research Council's Government-University-Industry Roundtable sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences/National Academy of Engineering/Institute of Medicine.

Participants urged the Department of Education to set up a task force to determine the feasibility and role of a Research Round Table with input from all the major players: government, industry, universities, and associations.

This task force would assist
(1) in evaluation and recommendations concerning the research agenda, and
(2) in identifying mechanisms for creating a new infrastructure which could include any or all of those structures mentioned above.

The participants also suggested that the ALA Committee on Accreditation encourage member schools to report annually on faculty research productivity.

All of which sounds noble, and difficult. As one of the

papers indicated, research is not a high priority item for professional associations. The profession may bemoan the lack of research and criticize those who, under various obstacles, attempt to do research. Nonetheless, association members have never made research one of their top priorities and are not likely to do so. But somewhere, somehow an information society will demand not just opinions about the best professional practice in the library/information science field, but also will ask the question, "Upon what research data are those opinions based?"

As ALA and other association members face the nineties, can they look beyond their current concerns to a larger role in the information age? This author believes that they can. The recommendations of this workshop provide a good beginning. But the profession had better be prepared to reorder some of its priorities for federal funding for libraries if it wishes to have a voice in the future of library/information science research.

NOTES

(1) The chairs of the the task forces were not just university types but also included other leaders in the profession. Chairpersons were Julie Virgo, Executive Vice President, The Carroll Group, "Professional Library Associations"; Duane Webster, Executive Director, Association of Research Libraries, "Library Think Tank"; Jerome Yavarkovsky, Director, New York State Library, "Library Consortia"; and Kathleen Heim, Dean, School of Library and Information Services, Louisiana State University, and Abraham Bookstein, Professor, Graduate Library School,

University of Chicago, "Library School Based Centers of Excellence." All of these papers, along with Dean Robert M. Hayes' introduction, have been published by USDE as "Building an Infrastructure for Library Research," volume III of Rethinking the Library in the Information Age.

(2) Earlier USDE advisory groups in 1986-87 had identified ten major researchable issues most important to the profession in the 1990s: policy issues (federal,state, and local roles and responsibilities); education and training of librarians; access to information; archives and preservation; organizing, indexing, and retrieving materials; role of the public services librarian; library funding and economics; libraries and education; information users and needs; and library models. A formidable list indeed! These ten issues were treated in a series of nine essays published in Rethinking the Library in the Information Age, volume II. The first volume of this series contains abstracts of the papers.

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